

Enby* Experiences of Weight and Weight Stigma

The Shape of Gender Beyond the Binary

JEN RINALDI AND MAY FRIEDMAN

This photo essay presents results from a digital storytelling project about trans experiences of weight stigma. We present summaries, excerpts, and still-images from three digital stories that explore the relationship between non-binary gender identity and body weight/shape/size.

Gender takes shape. Gender materializes in the curvature of the hip, the belly, the breast. That materialization can be very deliberate, for people signify their gender by *shaping* their bodies—making them soft in some places, taut in others. People put work into signification, using flesh and fat as their clay, for a range of reasons: to belong, to feel comfortable, to heed an inner voice, to resist external forces. This body-work was the crux of our research project *Transgressing Body Boundaries: Multi-Media Storytelling on Trans Approaches to Weight Stigma* (TBB).¹ The small project recruited ten trans² people—many of whom do not locate themselves on a gender binary—from around southwestern Ontario. With artistic assistance, each participant put together a digital story, or a short video that pairs autobiographical script with curated visuals. The resultant collection of ten digital stories presents a wide range of feelings about body weight, and experiences of weight stigma.

Such a study offers a valuable contribution to fat studies. This interdisciplinary, activist-informed field is a critical reaction to other areas of scholarship that identify fatness as a problem: a public burden, an ugliness, a death sentence (Cooper 24; Ellison, McPhail and Mitchinson 3; Gard and Wright 92). As “a radical field, in the sense that it goes to the root of weight-related belief systems” (Wann ix), fat studies research has the power to identify and critique the weight-based discrimination underpinning clinical

diagnosis and decision-making, public health policy, and cultural attitude. This field can also disentangle fatness from its medicalized frameworks, that is, it can theorize fat embodiment as something that exists outside clinical contexts (Paradis 57; Wray and Deery 227).

While the premise grounding fat studies itself is radical, scholarship that sits at the intersection of fatness and gender identity yields especially important insights that challenge the literature uncritically problematizing body weight/shape/size.³ Presumptions about body weight are entirely common in medical research on gender identity. As examples, medical studies on transitioning have framed fat re-distribution as an adverse implication or side effect of the treatments facilitating transition, especially hormone therapies (Chipkin and Kim 1241; Klaver et al. 3). There are also medical studies flagging weight as a risk factor that could impede transitioning options like gender affirming surgeries—leading medical practitioners to deny treatment until a patient loses weight (Ives et al. 7; Linsenmeyer et al. 3). Considering whether weight bias informs much of this research would benefit trans people who happen to be fat, who happen to get fat while transitioning, and who even intend to use fat distribution as a transitioning strategy. Prominent fat studies scholars interested in trans perspectives have provided such critiques (Bergman ch 15; LeBesco 51–54; Vade and Solovay 173; White “Embodying the Fat/Trans Intersection” ch 9). However, Francis Ray White (“Queering the Activist Body” 86) argues that this intersection is largely missing in fat studies scholarship, and deserving of greater attention. More scholarly attention would enable researchers to get at the nuances to gender identity, given transness is not a monolith, and is constantly evolving.

Transgressing Body Boundaries began from the premise that weight can be gendered, then posited that gender outside the confines of cisnormativity⁴ can be deeply complex. One such complexity that surfaced through the project's duration involved participants whose perspectives on fatness were untethered from binary thinking. This photo essay engages with these particular findings by presenting and analyzing excerpts from the project's digital story collection, focusing on videos created by people who identify as non-binary (or enby for short).⁵ First, we explain our project's digital storytelling methodology and this paper's photo essay format. In the substance of this essay, we provide selected still-images from TBB digital stories, and we use those images as a launching point into an exploration of the relationship between non-binary gender identity and body weight/shape/size.

Describing the Project

The *Transgressing Body Boundaries* project posed the following questions: How does body policing affect trans persons? How do trans persons navigate cultural expectations related to body weight, shape, and size? How do trans persons use fat to identify their gender? The ten participants recruited to engage with these questions came to this project naming their own gender identifiers, which included trans, trans man, trans woman, Two-Spirit, genderqueer, gender non-conforming, non-binary, gender-fluid, and gender-floral. They also chose their own identifiers in relation to body weight, shape, or size: fat, plus size, overweight, obese, weight issues, weight stigma experience, chubby, soft, and fluffy. In addition to these key identity markers, they drew upon their Indigeneity, race and ethnicity, class, disability, and age to inform their work. Each participant responded to the research questions by developing their own digital story.

TBB's digital storytelling methodology derives from Project Re•Vision, a research laboratory that uses critical arts-based approaches (Brushwood Rose and Granger 223; Rice et al. 515) to explore embodied difference. The various funded research projects under the lab's umbrella focus on vulnerable populations, including disabled persons, Autistic persons in particular, Indigenous youth, and queer folk. The methodology aligns with participatory action research, to the extent that participants are involved at every stage of the research creation process, and the stories they produce serve a political purpose: i.e., disrupting dominant narratives about under-served communities, and demanding social justice remedies.

The digital story itself is a microdocumentary, usually between two and ten minutes, that tells a story per-

sonal to the video-maker. Participants for this project developed and audio-recorded their story scripts in a writing workshop on Toronto Metropolitan University campus in February 2020. They collected and edited imagery to pair with their audio through the three months that followed, working remotely with project artists.⁶ Those participants who were adept at video editing used software on their own computers or were provided with software they could download onto their computers. Others less comfortable with video editing provided detailed directions and raw material so the project's hired artists could put together videos on the participant's behalf. Each participant decided whether their video would be credited to them or to a pseudonym, and some videos were created anonymously (by using abstract imagery, manipulating the sound of their voice, and leaving out credits).

The outcome was an archive of ten digital stories, each unique in terms of content and form. Participants told stories that were variously funny, matter-of-fact, and heartbreaking. Some drilled deep into a particular singular experience, while others reflected more broadly upon a lifespan of experiences. Because they recited their own script, they chose their tone, pace, and rhythm. They selected their video's imagery and participated in video editing, resulting in digital stories that used stock and family photographs, animation and drawing, video footage of dancing and daily routines, as well as photography of plasticine sculpture and body paint. Each participant owns their own video, and has a copy in their possession to use personally and professionally. The project's Research Ethics Board-approved consent form provided participants with a range of options regarding the research team's use of their video. Each video presented in this essay is used with permission.

Given the detailed and particular composition of each digital story, we (this essay's authors, both queer theorists who know gender-queerness in relation) approached the archive using narrative thematic analysis (Riessman ch 3) so we could identify themes within and between stories without decontextualizing them. Common to Project Re•Vision digital storytelling projects, this analytic approach entailed engaging with each story individually from start to finish, building a summary for each story that identified themes and arcs, then considering whether thematic patterns across the summaries emerged. This photo essay selects stories that exemplify the archive's key themes related to enby experiences, then presents each example through descriptive summary, quoted lines of script, and an illustrative still-shot excerpted image.⁷ Through this approach we show how the complexity or particularity of non-binary gender identity affects

experiences of body weight/shape/size and stigma. Our purpose is not to present a representative sample nor to provide a full accounting of this affect. We instead think that the digital stories featured in this photo essay invite readers to appreciate the infinite possibility beyond binary gender—the frustrating, exciting, painful, healing ways fat can be interpreted through a non-binary lens.



“I Loathe My Beating Heart”

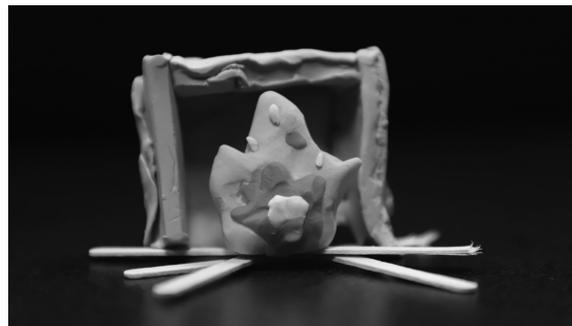
This untitled video opens with a sepia-toned old family photograph, laid on a black table top. The photograph features a Black child with thick hair tied back, in summer clothes and sneakers. The child is sitting at the edge of a lake, arms wrapped around their knees, head tilted down. A brown hand—belonging to the story’s narrator—comes into the video frame holding a marker, and proceeds to draw lines around the figure in the photograph. The lines are carefully drawn around every contour: shoulder blades, knee caps, shoe heels—until they entirely encase the child’s body. Whenever a full rotation is complete, the narrator pulls out a new Sharpie of a different colour, to trace the next outline. They do this again, and again, and again. The motions are methodical and mesmerizing.

“I was eleven years old,” they begin in the voice-over narrative, “the first time I contemplated suicide.” They explain why by referencing instances when their ambiguities made them feel like they did not fit in the world: childhood bullying over their gender enactments and Black Caribbean mixed racial descent; and medical practitioners recommending a full-scale transition that presumed binary gender. While tracing protective lines around their childhood image, the narrator describes their fat as a shield, or armour insulating them from these assaults. Fat, then, functions here as a coping strategy, but it exists for the storyteller alongside

self-injuring and self-isolating habits. The storyteller’s relationship with their armour is indeed profoundly fraught. In their rhythmic words: “I loathe my beating heart, for its every contraction carries that condition that I be constrained to this contraction that is my fat non-binary body.”

They find some solace in burlesque. The video-maker describes how they use performance and dance to reconcile themselves with their body. They note how this art form enables them to peel off clothing as though shedding protective layers, and to connect with others through exposure. While fat is not entirely a net positive for this storyteller, not always a point of pride, and sometimes even weaponized, they find catharsis without losing weight. While describing burlesque, they do not erase the body outlines they have drawn on their photograph to signify their fat. Instead they draw lines radiating out, like rays of sunshine, suggesting that fat is part of their exposure, and potentially re-signified in the process.

These efforts the narrator makes to come to terms with their body are not perfect, not entirely successful. The storyteller loops back to their original idea, ending with the words, “I was 25 years old the last time I attempted suicide.” Like the lines enveloping the child in the photograph, there is a circularity to this story, a return to the storyteller’s uneasy relationship with their body. This full-circle suggests that the trauma of living with ambiguity in a world that calls for the clean-and-clear-cut is not tidily resolvable.



“Wait for Me as I Expand”

The digital story titled *The e-girl Shapeshifter* features a series of photographs that experiment with stop-motion Claymation (or, clay animation) against a black backdrop. The first set of photographs features orange, red, and yellow plasticine molded into a fire, set over popsicle sticks. Encasing the flames is an open box made of lavender clay. This is a kiln, the video-maker explains—a motif they invoke throughout their narrative when referencing how they shape their body as though they were baking sculpture or pottery. They begin:

“It starts with a fire, crackling, warm, and bright. The timbre of my voice like the flame that creates. My body molded as if clay by [my] words.” This story starts with the storyteller calling their own gender into being.

The next set of images centres an avatar for the video-maker: a humanoid figure rendered entirely in orange clay. The sculpture is simply designed, without facial features or fingertips—reminiscent of a child’s craft. Its belly is round and protruding, soft and dimpled. The storyteller showcases this figure when describing how they enacted gender in virtual space: in “online forums, multi-player games, and niche singing communities.” These sorts of spaces made gender exploration easier because they were grounds for imaginative play, detached from the material body. In the imagery of the digital story, the orange figure is dressed in different lavender accessories. This colour scheme of orange and lilac is an undercurrent to the video, invoking the original figure of flame and kiln. The lavender adornments that appear in succession are varied: long hair, a pleated skirt, an iron breastplate. “There are days my character would be frilly,” the storyteller narrates through these costume changes, “and other days they would be coated with armour.” In this video, armour is but one accessory signaling gender, which can be donned and removed, in contrast to the heaviness of the armour referenced in the previous video. There is fluidity and playfulness driving this storyteller’s relationship to gender, at least in online space.

In the final leg of the digital story, the storyteller reflects on material constraints to their shapeshifting. Those con-

straints may be economic, given how clothing and hairstyle come with costs. Constraints may also be embodied, in the sense that body shape is not entirely left to intention. Fat is certainly fluid, itself shapeshifting over time, but in contrast with pixelated avatars it is not so compliant, nor so easily configured at will. The storyteller considers all this while coming to a place of self-love. The orange plasticine figure strikes poses among scattered globes, encounters a red clay person that bends down to kiss their tummy, then is covered in tiny lavender hearts—all tableaus celebrating this soft round body. Their comfort with gender play, as evidenced in their virtual explorations, may provide the storyteller with some insight into how to love their body whatever its form. They ask of others in closing remarks: “Wait for me as I expand. Do not shove me, touch me, or ask me to shrink in size.” In this line they frame bigness as beautiful, desirable, aligned with personal growth and acceptance.

“I Am Stepping into My Body with Care”

This untitled digital story begins with white text against a black background, defining the term acquiescence as “the agreement or consent by silence or without objection; compliance.” In juxtaposition, the narrator begins their voiceover with this declaration: “My gender as a butch nonbinary human is an expression of resistance.” The first image in this video features the storyteller, a brown face with cropped hair, staring directly into the camera and laughing. They are outdoors with plastic draped over their shoulders, and they are sitting for a haircut.



Their stylist, a large white person with feminine features, wipes flyaway hairs from the storyteller's neck, and rubs their scalp. This ritual the two are sharing, and their lively discussion, imply a comfortable intimacy.

This digital story's imagery consists of video footage following the storyteller through small moments and casual routines. Early video footage focuses on a leafy backyard garden, illuminated in soft sunlight. The tomatoes on the vine are still green. Paired with this footage, the narrator describes their gender: "I gratefully occupy both sides and I don't have to give up the gentle and tough parts of me." They feel at home in the gentle and the tough, playing with femininity and masculinity, without experiencing internal conflict. They are at peace with ambiguity. They describe "the soft parts" of themselves, terminology that may connote femininity and fatness: "the soft parts of me have cushioned the blows of grief and loss." In this passage they portray their body as protective, but less like battle armour and more like a loving companion.

This does not mean they are finished with body-work. The storyteller explores their feelings about top surgery (in this case a mastectomy for the purpose of gender confirmation). Video footage shows them standing shirtless before a full-length mirror, binding their chest. They note: "I approach top surgery as an avenue to wholeness. ...I am stepping into my body with care." As they wrap their binder firm, they describe their chest in the voice-over narration as one such a soft part of themselves, that has held crying loved ones. They make clear that their body deserves respect. But they worry surgeons will not practice respect, asking: "Will they see my mixed complexion and treat me as less than? Will they see my weight...and be less careful with the placement of my incisions?" With these words the video imagery shifts to an outdoor chore: woodworking with a large buzz-saw. In all the routines filmed for this video, the storyteller models best practices, approaching their work with caution, with intention, and with care.

For its conclusion, this coming-of-age story returns to the backyard garden for a family photograph—a queer couple and their dog—then to the storyteller binding their chest. They end on these confident words that reject binary gender, and that locate joy and desire in queered gender: "I refuse to deny myself the pleasure that comes from the in-between." The first story in this essay presented a struggle for self-acceptance, the second growth toward self-love; this final storyteller treats quiet care of an enby body as a refusal to acquiesce in the face of significant social pressure and potential violence.

Conclusion

In the unending performance of representation, gender

and body weight/shape/size are key markers of identity, held in the uneasy tensions of autonomous and organic factors. *Transgressing Body Boundaries* enabled participants to use digital storytelling as a form of identity recognition and exploration, to consider non-binary bodies at the intersections of fatness. Video-makers held the paradoxes of self-love and self-loathing, of warmth and adoration they felt for their bodies, alongside the cuts and blows inflicted by systems that revile non-normativity. Importantly, these stories, and the other digital stories created as a part of this project, resist pat conclusions in much the same way that the storytellers' bodies resist the dogma of pink and blue, male and female. Instead, project participants use this space to grapple, to contest, and to provide authentic reckoning of the myriad experiences of fat non-binary embodiments. The result is a supple and nuanced engagement with the complications and contradictions of bodies that shift and change in both intentional and unintentional ways in the messy spaces of identity and belonging.

Jen Rinaldi is an Associate Professor in Legal Studies at Ontario Tech University. A previous project involved working in partnership with Rainbow Health Ontario to create digital stories about queer (cis and trans) women's experiences of weight stigma.

May Friedman is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Toronto Metropolitan University. She writes on weight and gender, among other intersections.

Notes

**Enby* (a way of sounding out the acronym NB) is a short-form version of *non-binary*, an umbrella term for a range of gender identities that are not predicated on the assumption that gender is binary. People who are non-binary do not feel totally masculine or feminine.

¹*Transgressing Body Boundaries* was an extension of *Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life*, a multi-disciplinary mega-project that took as its objective cultivating activist art. *Bodies in Translation* was funded with a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Grant.

²*Trans* is an umbrella term (Latin for "on the other side") referring to persons who self-identify as transgender (both trans men and trans women), gender non-conforming, and non-binary/gender-fluid/genderqueer. These are persons who might enact their gender identity by making use of myriad strategies, including surgery, hormone treatment, clothing and hairstyle, gesture and voice. How they interpret gender can be wide-ranging and deeply personal, but always something other than the gender they were assigned at birth—with its corresponding cultural expectations.

³Body weight, shape, and size is a comprehensive ac-

counting of the identity marker this photo essay centres. This paper avoids medical and derogatory terminology like *obesity*. *Fat* and *fatness* are political terms, reclaimed in the fat studies field as purely descriptive, absent moralizing connotations. We admit, however, that the term remains hurtful for some, so wherever possible we use descriptors that research participants preferred.

⁴The *cis* in *cisnormativity* is a Latin term that literally means “on this side.” It references one’s gender identity aligning with (or, on the side of) the gender they were assigned at birth. *Cisnormativity* is the oppressive, ideological assumption that this alignment is natural, and any other gender identity is aberrant.

⁵*Non-binary* is an umbrella term for a range of gender identities that are not predicated on the assumption that gender is binary. The term shares some overlap (though it is not synonymous) with gender-fluid and genderqueer. People who are non-binary do not feel totally masculine or feminine. Another word for non-binary is *enby*, a common-parlance sounding-out of the acronym NB.

⁶The project’s original method was intended to have a shorter timeframe and more in-person workshop days, but had to be adapted due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁷Each of the three videos selected for this essay was created by a non-binary research participant who uses the pronouns they/them/their. We do not use their names so as to provide consistent confidentiality.

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